

Khaleda's call for national unity

Hoping for a positive change

SHAKHAWAT LITON

A decade ago, when she was in power, Khaleda Zia tried but could not forge national unity to fight militancy. Almost all parties boycotted the talks because of her party's strong ties with Jamaat-e-Islami, a party accused of patronising militancy. Her latest move to forge national unity to rid Bangladesh from militancy faces the same fate, as little has changed and there is fresh pressure on her to sever ties with Jamaat, an anti-liberation force.

Can Khaleda make a difference this time? After the countrywide unprecedented bomb blasts by the militant outfit JMB on August 17, 2005, then premier Khaleda Zia had offered a 'national dialogue' to find ways to stop bomb terrorism. She had invited 27 political parties and 15 professional bodies to the dialogue that began on December 12 amid boycotts by the opposition alliance. Then main opposition, the Awami League-led 14 party, boycotted the dialogue in a united manner, protesting the presence of Jamaat's leaders in Khaleda's cabinet. On the first day of the dialogue, Krishak Shramik Janata League asked Khaleda Zia to expel two Jamaat's leaders, Motiur Rahman Nizami and Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mojaheed - who were recently executed for committing war crimes - from the cabinet on charges of patronising militancy in the country.

The then ruling BNP had also faced tremendous internal pressure when a number of senior BNP leaders categorically alleged that Jamaat was the main force behind militancy. For his vociferous statement about Jamaat's role in militancy, then BNP lawmaker Abu Hena was punished by Khaleda Zia with expulsion from the party. As Khaleda Zia declined to take any step against Jamaat, the much-hyped anti-militancy talks fizzled out with only three political parties and five professional bodies



Khaleda Zia at a sit-in programme in 2010 with Jamaat chiefs Motiur Rahman Nizami and Delwar Hossain Sayeedi.

joining. Thus, the goal of creating national unity was far from being realised.

After the unprecedented attack on a Gulshan café on July 1 that killed 20 hostages, the BNP chief urged for national unity to fight militancy. She urged the government to hold talks on how to fight militancy. Her party has planned to hold a national convention on militancy, inviting leaders of all political parties and representatives of professional bodies. But again Jamaat-e-Islami appeared as a stumbling block to her move. A number of senior ministers and ruling AL leaders have categorically rejected her call, stating that neither the government nor the AL will hold any talks with BNP. In defence, AL leaders stressed that BNP will have to sever its ties with Jamaat that opposed the country's Liberation War and allegedly patronised different militant outfits.

AL's stance may be viewed by some as merely a political strategy. But when some pro-BNP professionals and intellectuals on Thursday night at a meeting with Khaleda advised her to sever ties with Jamaat, the issue should have been given more importance. A number of leaders of the BNP, on condition of anonymity, told media that many eminent

personalities and leaders of political parties will not join BNP's convention if Jamaat leaders were present.

Yet, Khaleda Zia remains nonchalant. She is still unwilling to sever her party's ties with Jamaat. Considering the historical background, it is not so easy for her to cut the ties with a party with whom they have had a long, solid partnership. This goes back to General Zia, whose ascendancy to power as a military strongman after the bloody changeover of August 15, 1975, was the beginning of a 'bright future' for the anti-liberation forces.

As Gen Zia gradually consolidated his power and transformed himself into a political leader, he had introduced his own style of politics, which appeared as a blessing for anti-liberation forces and religion based political parties. In 1978, Zia also made Abdul Alim a minister, who was convicted of crimes against humanity in 2013.

Gen Zia had amended the Constitution through martial law proclamations in 1977, lifting a constitutional ban on religion-based politics. This opened the door for anti-liberation political parties, including Jamaat-e-Islami, to resume activities in independent Bangladesh. Jamaat and some other parties

had been constitutionally banned after the country's independence for their role against the country's Liberation War in 1971.

The BNP led by Khaleda forged an unofficial compromise with the anti-liberation force Jamaat in some constituencies in the parliamentary election in 1991 to defeat the Awami League. Following the pact, the BNP extended support to some Jamaat-backed candidates, while it returned the favour to BNP in the same way.

After Khaleda-led BNP won the 1991 elections, it appointed Abdul Rahman Biswas, known as a 'peace committee' member during our freedom struggle, as the Speaker of the Parliament. Within six months, he was elected President of Bangladesh on BNP's nomination in October 1991. In doing so, Khaleda followed the footsteps of her late husband Zia who had made Biswas a minister of his cabinet in 1979.

Khaleda Zia, however, took it to the next level. During Gen Zia's regime, anti-liberation politicians were given important positions in the government only after they had joined the BNP. Her BNP formed an electoral alliance with Jamaat before the 2001 parliamentary elections. She shared power with Jamaat directly after winning the polls, by inducting

Jamaat's Ameer Motiur Rahman Nizami and Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mojaheed into her cabinet, giving them important portfolios.

Together they had waged unprecedented violent street agitations in several phases against the AL-led government since 2013 and in early 2015, but their agitations failed.

Khaleda faced tremendous pressure in some occasions in the past to cut ties with Jamaat. But she never conceded to the pressure. Now, the crucial question is: will the 'uncompromising' leader change her mind for the sake of national unity in the wake of these terror attacks?

The answer most likely will be no, as she still strongly favours her party's ties with Jamaat even after so many developments in the political arena in the last six years since the beginning of the trial of war criminals in 2010. What are the lessons of the politics of the last six years for the BNP leader to learn?

Whatever may be the weakness of the war crimes trial there cannot be any question that people have extended their wholehearted support to the trial even if nearly 40 years late. Many of them are still bearing the pain of the atrocities of Jamaat's leaders who had collaborated with the Pakistani occupational army to carry out genocide to foil the birth of Bangladesh in 1971.

For its heinous role in 1971, the Jamaat has been dubbed as a terrorist organisation in several judgements delivered by the International Criminal Tribunals. Its registration as a parliamentary party with the Election Commission has also been scrapped by the High Court in 2013 as Jamaat's objectives stipulated in its charter run counter to the country's constitution. It means Jamaat is now disqualified to contest the parliamentary election.

Yet, how does Khaleda Zia, chief of one of the major political parties in Bangladesh, still favours keeping her party's ties with Jamaat when many of her party's leaders blame the party's present sorry state for maintaining ties with the anti-liberation force?

Khaleda Zia, whose role in the anti-Ershad movement was laudable must now rethink her politics. Her strong role in anti-autocracy struggle was lauded by people who honoured her by voting BNP to power in the parliamentary elections held in 1991. Again, she became elected prime minister in 2001. The records show she should rely on people to lead her party, instead of Jamaat, to lead her BNP to the power again.

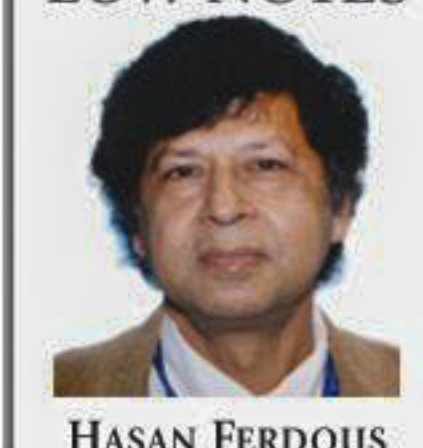
Considering the ground political reality, therefore, the BNP chief should reassess her current political strategy and come up with a new brand of politics as she promised in her party's national council a few months ago.

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THE GULSHAN MAYHEM

What more could we have done?

HIGH NOTES
LOW NOTES

HASAN FERDOUS

MY plane touched down at Dhaka airport at about the time when the joint security operation against terrorists at Gulshan's Holey Artisan Bakery was underway. Almost ten hours had passed and five youths, just out of

their teens, were challenging Bangladesh's security establishment. When they did dare, it took them under 13 minutes to finish off the youths, leading to the claim that it was a huge success.

Not only were lives lost - innocent and uninvolved - but our idea of youthful innocence also died with it. Our failure to intercept the carnage and stop it is now on full display on so many fronts. There are two opposing thoughts: on the one hand, a sense of collective guilt, and on the other, a stubborn denial. The guilt is in the fact that these were our kids - born and bred in the society's upper echelon and schooled at the nation's best academic institutions. What more could we have done? That's the question that the parents seem to be asking. The denial is from the government and some opinion leaders, who seem to be implying that this was just an isolated event, just an aberration, carried out by misguided youths.

Such things happen in America every day, I have heard members of our 'chattering' class bleating in their midnight talk shows. "More people died in launch accidents during this year's Eid," one of them said at a recent talk show, implying this was no big deal. One of the talking heads, explaining the mindset of the terrorists, even compared them with leftist revolutionaries in our country and elsewhere. "Jyoti Basu was a barrister but he became a leftist, didn't he," he argued. And the show's host, unable to complete one full Bangla sentence without lacing it with five English words often used incorrectly, chimed in to blame the Western media for its obsession with Bangladesh.

Wrong. This was truly a big thing. Its monumentality should not be measured in terms of number of lives lost, but in the very nature of the tragedy. It's our children and we do not know them. It's our children who take so much pleasure in killing complete strangers. It is our children who seem to have unbound pride in displaying their "trophies" through social media.

Within days, it became clear that the problem of homegrown "jihadists" is much

wider than we had ever contemplated. The administration has been very reticent with its investigation results, but the local media have moved in to fill in the blanks. As many as 150 "jihadists" may be out there, either perfecting the killing art in terror camps inside Bangladesh or maybe even landing in the so-called Islamic State. As if to confirm this premonition, three young men, touting their terror utensils and appropriate head gears, declared in Bangla and English that there would be more such attacks.

The government has been obsessed with the argument that this was not IS' handiwork, but that of a handful of homegrown terrorists. What difference does it make whether they are homegrown or imported via the terror Khilafat? IS itself took no time to claim responsibility; all debates on IS or not should end right then and there.

Yet not everything is lost. Ever since the

We hope the security groups involved in investigating the case would include social scientists and psychiatrists, who could help map the mindset of these terrorists. Such an exercise should not be done in the typical bureaucratic hierarchical isolation and secrecy.

Gulshan mayhem, the entire country has been consumed by an unprecedented conversation on terrorism and societal responsibility. There is even a slim chance of bringing all, including the political opposition, under one roof to formulate a comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy. That is perhaps the only silver lining emerging out of this unprecedented tragedy.

The focus of the security apparatus has mostly been on the use of fire power to counter terrorism. While this is important, no less important is a better understanding of the mindset of these terrorists. What drives these "perfectly normal" young men to choose a path of mayhem and self-destruction? The usual theory of poverty-driven action for collective justice does not explain the Gulshan tragedy. The five young men so far identified were mostly from the affluent strata of the society and were well educated. Yet, they embraced an

ideology which completely counters everything our society stands for. Why?

The answer still eludes us. We hope the security groups involved in investigating the case would include social scientists and psychiatrists, who could help map the mindset of these terrorists. Such an exercise should not be done in the typical bureaucratic hierarchical isolation and secrecy. We are talking about our children and every parent has the right to know the truth they unearth.

For those from Western Europe joining IS, the mindset of a terrorist is not difficult to understand. These young men and, in some cases women, live on the fringes of society and don't see a clear future for themselves in a growing anti-immigrant atmosphere. Repressed sexuality is another powerful motivating factor. The creation of IS - a real state with territory, some form of government, employment opportunities and "sex slaves", provides a tempting choice for many of these "social misfits".

The "Gulshan five" and the 150 or so young men reportedly missing from their homes don't fit this prescription. We can only speculate that they are motivated by a powerful ideology that promises a better life in this world and hereafter. This may have been enabled by a fast spreading practice of religious piety. Religion in today's Bangladesh is like a daily dose of collective staple, and the young are perfectly comfortable consuming it in large doses. Are we sure we know what they are consuming? I attended this year's Eid prayer at Gulshan's new multi-million dollar mosque, where the Imam declared - without batting his eyelashes - that during the early years of Islam, pious Muslims shared their "second wife" with those seeking refuge in Medina. No eyebrow was raised and when I tried to protest, those around counselled me to keep quiet.

Another enabling factor may have been the widespread use of violence. We love to describe our society as peaceful and docile. The reality is just the opposite. Violence is a regular diet dished out by political parties of all hues, legitimising the use of brute force. Women and children are publicly beaten and social disputes are often settled in the most violent manner. Thanks to YouTube and Facebook, we now have a trove of evidence, a virtual catalogue of our love for violence.

Add to this the pervasive nature of social media, enticing the young and the beguiled to an illusory reality. Could these have all been contributing factors?

We don't know but we must try to know and understand. The future of our country and the future of our children are at stake. Nothing can be more important than claiming it back.

One last thing. There is agreement among social scientists that one of the driving factors behind mindless acts of the modern terrorist is self-aggrandizement. They feel "heroic" when the whole world talks about them. This is clear from the many snap chats and twitter posts made by the "kids" right in the middle of the Gulshan mayhem. The Afghan-American man, who this year in June

killed almost fifty people at a gay club in Orlando, USA, stopped several times to check his Facebook page to see how the world was reacting to his brutality. Let's stop "lionising" them by refusing to name or identify them. They are just killers - no name, no family, no identity.

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